

+MONASTIC OBEDIENCE

7 March 2024

Monastic obedience is central to our whole living of the monastic life for it reflects our fundamental desire to be true hearers of God's word. All day long we have occasion to be attentive to what God wishes to say to us through our silence and solitude, through our life in community, through the persons we continually encounter, speak to, are asked to help or work beside.

The Divine Office to which nothing is to be preferred, is a constant call from God so that we may sing God's praises. There and during the Eucharist we open ourselves to the presence and action of the Holy Spirit who intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words. If we are listening carefully even as we are singing the praises of the Lord, we are being trained to hear God's word all day long.

Let me say right off that as I read through this chapter of Augustine Roberts' book, I quickly became aware of how we could easily spend the rest of the year discussing, reflecting on, incorporating in our lives the content of what he is seeking to convey. The whole of our lives as Christians is a daily process of learning how to hear God speak to us from the moment we rise in the morning until we fall asleep at night. And even in our sleep God may speak to us if we remember our dreams and know how to interpret them. There was a Sister of Loretto who became an expert at helping those who came to her to talk about their dreams.

Let us read the last paragraph on p. 162. The whole of our life is a call to accomplish what God wants of us and yet our Creator "has chosen to respect the dignity and freedom of his children, so he does not force their accomplishment of his desires. He elicits it, drawing it out as gently as possible from their free will so that it may express their love, not their fear of punishment." This sums up the thrust of this whole chapter, of how the obedience that is being asked of us is to be an expression of love. God is the all loving one and wants nothing so much from us as love in return.

If we are going to have access to God's will for us, we must accept how "other created beings intervene in order to communicate God's will to us," we must accept what Roberts calls "a system of mediation." It is our life of prayer; it seems to me that goes a long way in helping us to accept the way God draws

near to us through those with whom we live and who have been asked to serve as persons of authority. Let's read the 3rd paragraph on p. 163.

The authority that God has ordained for us is not to lessen our own gifts and talents but to bring them to full fruition. The 1st paragraph on p. 164 tells of this so let's read it. There is also a deep interplay between the role of authority in our lives and the inner voice of conscience. This is nicely presented in the 2nd paragraph on p. 165 with a quote from the Vat. II document Gaudium et Spes, so let's read these.

Central to all of Augustine Roberts' thinking is how fidelity to vows is centered on our calling to be faithful followers of Christ in his own obedience to the Father. This is carefully summarized in the 2nd paragraph on p. 166 so it is worth reading.

The struggle we engage in, if we are going to be true followers of Christ is nicely described by St Paul and summed up here in the 2nd paragraph on p. 267 so let us read it. St Paul also reminds us that as we enter into the obedience of Christ to the Father we are also called upon to share in Christ's suffering. He quotes from the Letter to the Hebrews that speaks of how Jesus, "Son though he was, he learned obedience through what he suffered." This is a quote that was dear to our early Cistercian fathers for it brings home just how close to our own human life, how deeply the Eternal Word of God has come in taking on our human nature. With Christ we are to call out "Abba, Father" and know how lovingly he hears us.

The call to make a vow of obedience is all about a divine initiative, something that we must never forget. The last paragraph on p. 169 accentuates this so let us read it. We are being called into a mystery much larger than any of us can begin to fathom. We are brought into God's saving work of redemption for the good of all humanity, for the whole of the human family. This plan of God is hard to begin to imagine but important not to forget amid what can often seem to be nothing more than a daily routine. Our Mission is beautifully described in the 2nd paragraph on p. 170 and worth reading.

When we make a promise or vow of obedience it is not only to the precepts of the Holy Rule but to a whole set of authoritative structure in the Church as described in the last paragraph on p. 173 so let's read that summary. As the

2nd paragraph on the same page indicates, the authority within the Church "is meant to continue the supreme power of the Risen Christ so let us read this paragraph as well. Authority in the Church is to exercise its power "out of service to the members of the community." How this authority works within a monastic community is shown in the 1st paragraph on p. 174.

What the exercise of authority is to bring about in each of our lives is critical for our own spiritual development. Read the last paragraph on p. 175. In a monastery the superior, the abbot or abbess receives power over us only by our free consent. So it is important that we give ourselves to this particular person because we believe he or she holds the place of Christ in the monastery. Roberts then points out that "our inner dispositions are even more paramount, since it is in the heart that the life of Christ takes root and grows. Read the quote from the Rule, the last paragraph on p. 177.

The Spirit of Monastic Obedience is nicely described in the 3rd paragraph on p. 179. Read this for the real meaning of our obedience "is the interior transformation worked by complete dedication to the will of Christ." And this is to take place all day long as is so well expressed in the 2nd and 3rd paragraphs on p. 181 so let's read these.

I've always loved the Pauline hymn to the obedient Christ as expressed Phil 2:6-9 and the professor I had in Scripture when I studied in Rome told us that this hymn summarized the best of what was being written in the field of Christology at that time. Let us read paragraph 2 on p. 182. The 2nd and 3rd paragraphs on p. 183 show the real value of obeying another human being if we are to come to that humility that makes a real monk and frees us from hypocrisy and a spirit of criticism.

The last paragraph on p. 185 under the section called **OBEDIENCE, WEAK AND STRONG** tells of where authentic obedience will take us, a sharing in Christ's very own love. Let's read that paragraph that takes us over to the next page. Neglecting an authentic practice of obedience takes us into some very harmful tendencies in our living of monastic life. These are touched upon in the last paragraph on p. 188 and are worth learning about. The real practice of obedience comes out of a full immersion in community living so let's end this class by reading the 2nd paragraph on p. 198.